

FILIPINO STUDENT COUNCIL HEADS’ LEADERSHIP FRAMES: A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

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“Colleges and universities provide fertile grounds for students to cultivate and improve their leadership potentials.”

INTRODUCTION

The growth of leadership among students is perceived to be a key goal for any academic institution. This is because colleges and universities provide fertile grounds for students to cultivate and improve their leadership potentials (Humphreys, 2011). Channeled via student councils in universities and colleges, higher education institutions (HEIs) have created various forms of leadership development strategies to instill and propagate the potentials of student leaders. The motivation behind the roles of student councils in developing or molding the minds of the students may vary across HEIs, but there is a perceived unison in the agenda: to provide venues in discussing, educating, and, hopefully, transforming how leaders serve their clients (Dugan, 2006). One may perhaps even claim that student councils are arms institutionalizing leadership in the academic setting, since discourses of and about the creation of leaders are situated in the way student leadership is created and communicated. It seems that leadership and development are academically delivered with a positive language to change the individuals and organizations, with a promise and an attempt to mitigate academic and social ills (Astin & Astin, 2000).

Studies on student leadership inside HEIs talk about a variety of frames: Research on ways in which leadership is perceived (Dugan & Komivcs, 2007; Hoffman & Acosta-Orozco; 2015); how it is lived (Logue, Hutchens, & Hector, 2005); how educational

institutions' religious affiliations affect the way students exercise their potentials (Hine, 2014); and how involvement in student organizations constitutes leadership potentials (Haber, Allen, Facca, & Shankman, 2012). Since millennial students are also described as digital natives, platforms in exercising their leadership styles are investigated (Amirianzadeh, 2012). Gender difference, too, has been one of the factors accounted for in terms of how student leadership is shaped (Dugan, 2006; Dugan & Komivcs, 2007; Yarrish, Zula, & Davis, 2010).

Context of Current Research

There has always been a claim in the Philippines that the drive toward the much-needed change in government will be ushered by youthful aspirations (Velasco, 2005). This has been the case for national heroes like José Rizal, who, in his 20s, helped the country topple 300 years of Spanish rule. Insurgency movements and political uprising in recent years have been actively participated in by college and university students as both private and public higher education institutions formally and informally mobilize their students to participate in activism, with the hope that exposure to such events will unleash the potential for leadership and develop in them a sense of nationhood. However, there is a dearth of literature documenting the characteristics of student leadership, particularly at the HEI in the Philippines.

Given this reality, it is important to study the perceptions of Filipino student leaders on the nature and value of leadership and development. Using the perceptions of college student leaders from higher educational institutions in Metro Manila, this research explored the question: What constructs of leadership are used by Filipino student leaders at colleges and universities in Metro Manila?

Specifically, the study wanted to:

1. Describe the process of creating the discourse of leadership from the selected leaders;
2. Identify the themes of leadership that are constructed by the selected set of student leaders; and
3. Analyze the ways in which the leadership discourse is mediated vis-à-vis the immediate surroundings.

Theoretical Lens

To look at the constructions of the perceptions on leadership, this study used Berger and Luckmann's (1991) Social Construction of Reality. The theorists begin their analysis by arguing from the ground up for reality and knowledge. They are clear in saying that for an investigation of what is real, there must be clear lenses to show how reality should be seen. In this perspective, they take the stance of sociologists. For them, a

question on “reality” and “knowledge” is “justified by the facts of their social relativity” (p. 15) Berger and Luckmann proceed by pointing out that each individual has his/her own point of view on matters of assessing reality, the majority depending upon social contexts and relationships. Moreover, the theory argues that an “agreed upon” world exists as a product of similarities on the perception of concepts and situations.

In arguing further that an individual would see his reality in the context of his experience with the world, Berger and Luckmann contended an individual’s world is shaped by the individuals he communicates with in his day-to-day existence. In effect, there is a sense of *tabula rasa* in the conception of reality. One starts empty—with society leaving imprints as the individual progresses in his/her lifetime. Furthermore, such a perspective offers the idea that an individual learns and values learning through constant engagement with others. In such a situation, the individual forms his/her reality: a reality validated by the narratives of the society to which he/she belongs.

In this study, the student leaders were asked to define how they construct leadership in their own councils. Given that they already have experienced the realities of leadership, it would be interesting to identify how they see development in their own backyard. Moreover, the discourse of leadership and, perhaps even the problems associated with the concepts, might arise during the construction of the concepts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nature of Perceptions

In the literature, perceptions play a great role in developing attitude, behavior, and practices. Across cultures and societies, contexts and content, perceptions of how leadership is portrayed, valued, presented, and lived have intrigued researchers and practitioners of leadership. A perception is said to aid in accurately presenting objects, property, and relations in the environment. Graham (2014) argued that for us *Homo sapiens*, perception is a vision from a spatially accurate distance. Graham (2014) cited Palmer (1999) who said that perception “gives a perceiver highly reliable information about the locations and properties of environmental objects while they are safely distant” (Palmer, 1999, p.6). Graham further noted that perceptions are made accurate by how individuals see objects and properties and how these relate to the perceiver and his/her environment. Based on these, it can be deduced that perceptions are cognitive visions influencing people in naming objects, people, and concepts. Also implied is that such constructions are informed by the perceivers’ social situations and realities. This means for one to perceive a concept properly, there must be a focused and grounded introspection derived from one’s experiences.

The Filipino Students' Political Leadership

In a report by UNICEF and the Philippines' Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) in 2007, the Filipino youth is part of a collective body which is slowly shaping the political sphere of the world. The report argued that training young Filipino leaders is part of "an emerging movement worldwide to give the youth a direct role in shaping policies and programs" (United Nations Children's Fund, 2007, p.14). Youth in Metro Manila today still participate in at least one socio-civic or political organization allowing them to be involved in ethical consumerism such as donating to the poor, buying or boycotting products based on principle, and supporting fundraising activities. Also, the study has shown that electoral participation, too, is valued amongst these youth as they register to vote. Fortunately, they still value their relationship with their peers and show a deep love of country.

The Filipinos' Socio-Cultural and Communicative Environment

Taking off from post-colonial narrations on the self, various Filipino authors have embarked on a journey to define the Filipino sense of being from the vantage point and experience of the local. Enriquez (1976), along with many Filipino intellectuals of the 1970s, began a journey to redefine the way the Filipino psyche had been defined. With the purpose to undo the Western impressions about the nation, Enriquez wanted to change the colonizers' notions about the Philippines regarding the effort to reject the Western model for the Filipino identity (Pe-pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). Filipino values such as shame (hiya) have been reframed: from shame to external propriety.

RESEARCH METHOD

Thirteen student leaders from colleges and universities in Metro Manila were individually interviewed. Five were females and eight were males. Eight of these came from private colleges and universities, while five studied at government-owned colleges and universities. Interviews were conducted from July to December 2015, held at off-campus locations selected by the students. Students told narratives of their experiences as student leaders. They reflected on their roles as leaders, including their manner of communicating with their peers. Interviews were audio-recorded and field notes were taken.

Thematic analysis was used to see how the student leaders constructed and enunciated the discourse of development as leaders. The researcher looked at the narratives from the select private and public HEIs. Open coding was used to find themes from the data (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013). The gathered data were arranged in a dendrogram (Drout & Smith, 2012) showing the most significant content from students and significant statements mentioned by informants. The dendrogram was also used in identifying categories of codes and valuable themes.

RESULTS

Constructing the Discourse of Leadership

Findings from the interviews showed the portrayal of leadership resting on two important concepts: the *abilities* of the leader and the *contextual needs* of the audiences. The narratives revealed that student leaders put emphasis on how their personalities would guide them. Attributes such as compassion, passion, discipline, enthusiasm, responsiveness, and openness were concepts shared by the leaders. One mentioned if a leader “knows how to go along with the direction the body [or group] wants,” a smooth interpersonal relationship could happen. Some of them also confessed that “attitude determines leadership” as influence is seen in such a trait. One narrated that the attributes should be present before engagement with students; a leader can never really know the expectations of the audience.

Interestingly, results suggested that females are guided by traits in looking at leadership while male student leaders look at their own set of skills in their own experiences. A common sentiment from the female leaders was that a leader must be well liked before, during, and after service. Desirable traits are treated as part of the skill set, too. One female leader stated that it is necessary to be nice since she is the voice of “unwavering integrity” in the school. On the other hand, the male student leaders mentioned that skills are necessary for exercising leadership. One mentioned that since they are always exposed to needs and wants of students, they require communication skills. For that leader, passion cannot guarantee leadership. Another informant mentioned, “we have to dig deeper as student leaders are expected to have the capacity to unite the school — hence the inevitability to use functional skills.” Also mentioned was that student leaders have no “monopoly of great ideas, so they are in the best position to develop the skills of others to think and be heard.” Student leaders must identify their skill sets early on, as these skills can be sources of power. In the words of a male student leader, “If that power enters your senses, then imagine what these can do to your pride and leadership.”

Constructs of Leadership

Results of the interviews revealed similarities and differences on how male and female student leaders construct their leadership on their own campuses. Three themes of leadership emerged from the lived experiences of the heads of student councils: leadership as a skill, as a trait, and as an opportunity to become “first among equals.”

The informants revealed that leaders equate leadership to the possession of various skill sets. One student leader said if one knows how to “manage time and possess managerial skills,” one could easily function well. Also, leadership skills such as one’s

ability to prioritize others more than oneself are also necessary for fulfillment of the duties and responsibilities of the leader. Furthermore, good communication skills, such as one's capacity to listen, are perceived as a necessity as this "allows and facilitates communication with the followers."

The student leaders shared that leadership is about showing desirable traits to the students. One of the leaders mentioned if a leader possesses desirable traits such as responsibility, the students would not complain about the way that person runs a council. Since the student leaders believe leaders need followers, there is a strong identification that a leader must be patient, kind, and cordial to the students. It was observed that when the students chose leaders, accountability was essential to serve these individuals.

The narratives also revealed, student leaders who perceive their subordinates as equals are more effective. This is because, as one leader noted, "serving as a good example while being humble about it makes one effective." Another informant seconded this by suggesting a leader is not only someone who is first among equals, but also has the voice to comfort others while the job is being executed.

Interestingly, female student leaders indicated leadership can be a source of inspiration and a useful voice of reason. One female student leader said, "leadership is about positive notion" and part of her attitude to radiate encouragement. Another female student leader stated that one knows "which side to take and which action to support." Male student leaders, on the other hand, assert leadership is a state of being. As one of the male leaders mentioned, "leadership doesn't mean that it has to follow patterns." He furthered that modifications are necessary to serve the people.

Mediating Leadership

A variety of themes emerge from the male and female student leaders in this study. Female leaders believe context is necessary to frame leadership, while male student leaders argue rules must not be bent.

Females are convinced that in the exercising of leadership qualities, it is necessary to see how they relate to the structure of the council. One held that if the leader knows her place in the structure of leadership, she would know how to advise the students to channel their concerns to proper administrative counterparts. Another mentioned she made herself familiar with the directory of students to help her identify relevant information.

Moreover, the female student prefers to establish a connection with her peers and the whole student body. This allows her to use social media to obtain the feel of the

audience. One respondent mentioned, “We use it to get real-time concerns and give on-the-spot feedback.” Another leader finds satisfaction in receiving Facebook messages even in the wee hours, validating her relationship with her audience. Yet another stated that social media hash-tags are used to make students aware of advocacies of the student council and create a sense of identity for the school community. Female leaders also united in saying that face-to-face interactions facilitate in establishing leadership. Even with technology, one female council president believes that “personal attention to the concerns of others is essential.” A student shared they hold a “monthly dialogue between leaders and student representatives so they can identify proper actions to issues.”

On the other hand, male student leaders generally feel that decision-making should not be based only on context, since policies rule. One said, “The constitution is the sole basis of the rights of the students.” He continued that general plans must be based on certain binding ground rules.

Male student leaders also suggest the power of face-to-face encounters with students is still potent in establishing oneself as a leader. One stated that to address grievances of students, the council must face the people. Part of the mantra of the council is to be perceived as a friend to everyone. For another respondent, consultation is important as this enables integration of insights between council and student body. He said, “We have a committee in student government called Educational Development and Research assigned to research student information.” A male leader claimed room-to-room campaigns strengthened the value of face-to-face consultations. He said, “it establishes the importance of listening and communicating to identify the root problem.” Another male student leader added, more than social media tools, he believes a “personal relationship is more valuable when concerns are addressed personally.”

DISCUSSION

Constructs of leadership and processes in mediating leadership were described in this study. Findings show leadership is contextualized based on the demands of the school setting as well as the leaders’ skill and trait sets. The leaders also claimed that visibility is a necessity as leaders are expected to have a face-to-face presence, and communication is established and maintained to guarantee the student body can become efficient.

The interviews revealed that leadership is recognized as a positive concept. The narratives have shown student leaders value their commitment to the colleges and

universities, and being elected to the position means their initiative will be of service and inspiring to other students (Miles, 2010). A select group of student leaders shows that to excel in good service to student-constituents, it is necessary to master skills and traits. At the same time, the interviews reveal control is needed to effectively govern the body. The study also supports the literature indicating exposure of students to activities that enhance leadership development provide venues for furthering academic experience (Lott, 2013; Johnson, 2015).

Narratives of the student leaders show that student council heads adhere to the collectivist nature of the Filipinos. This primacy of the collective over the individual was observed in how student leaders tried to mitigate their leadership constructs, particularly on the sentiments of the select student council heads prioritizing the needs of the students by being “first among equals.” Furthermore, the council leaders’ narratives revealed they do not impose their know-how on leadership but rather utilize interactive processing and established norm-based rules (e.g. constitutions) to justify their leadership stances.

This study argues that student leaders are comfortable communicating with people within their social groups. Also, although there may be a decrease of comfort as Filipino student council heads move from their inner circle to their outer group, they bridge this difference by establishing mediated ways, like social media, to connect with their various audiences. Moreover, although not entirely a Filipino communication behavior, the author observed the way student council presidents have represented the voices of students via formal and informal ways such as feedback forms, websites and social media posting (Decoding Youth, Young Adults and Young Families, 2010).

Since Filipinos often operate in a collectivist and high-context culture, the student leaders said face-to-face encounters and a more “personal touch” are used by the council presidents. These approaches are comforting because they ensure smooth interpersonal relationships between the head and the governed. Finally, differences between male and female student leadership have been established in this study. Discourse of female leadership revealed a more nurturing and contextual approach to leading people. This aligns with past findings that revealed a higher participative and collaborative approach to leadership compared to men (Carli & Eagly, 2012; Posner, 2014). The findings also supported literature contending that women leaders tend to place a greater emphasis on relationships, seek more collaboration among followers, and share more information and power than male leaders (Dugan & Komivcs, 2007; Yarrish, Zula, & Davis, 2010).

This study has supported Berger and Luckmann's (1991) assertion that social life is a primary unit in understanding how humans interpret their world. Leadership construction can be comprehended by examining how these student heads' academic, cultural, and gender roles influence how they govern councils. The symbolic interaction between council heads and the rest of students has shaped the way leadership has developed within the framework of student councils in the Philippines. Leadership appears to be the possession of traits and skills, framed within a gender-based, collectivist, hierarchical, and high-context set-up, because these are the framed rules of student HEI leadership.

CONCLUSION

Overall, leadership development is seen as a desirable training ground for students. Higher learning institutions must be able to sustain the activity of this non-formal education arm if the goal is to create an army of educated citizens (Amirianzadeh, 2012; Lott, 2013; Posner, 2014). The interviews reflected that students have a positive conception of leadership which must be nurtured further. The students expressed they are engaged in development of their student bodies, and see themselves as potentially strong citizens who could utilize their student governments to accomplish tasks and aid in the continuing transformation to modernization of the Filipino societies. It is, therefore, recommended that HEIs in the Philippines invest more in training, teaching, and exposing their student leaders to various leadership opportunities and skills to harness the potential of leadership development in strengthening the future institutional leaders of the land.

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